DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 269 977 FL 015 716

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TITLE Aspects of the Teaching and Learning of Communicative Competence in French.
PUB DATE 80
NOTE 13p.; In: Papers in Language Learning and Language Acquisition. Papers presented at the Nordic Conference on Applied Linguistics (2nd, Hanasaari, Espoo, Finland, November 23-25, 1979); see FL 015 708.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; *Communicative Competence (Languages); *Curriculum Development; Foreign Countries; *French; Material Development; *Notional Functional Syllabi; Secondary Education; Second Language Instruction; *Student Developed Materials
IDENTIFIERS Council of Europe (France); Sweden

ABSTRACT

An experiment in teaching French in Sweden was based on a version of a Council of Europe proposal for a core language curriculum consisting of basic needs for language functions, notions, topics, vocabulary, and grammar. The model targets a variety of learning and age levels, but the Swedish program concerned secondary level teaching of French as a second or third language. Teachers and students working together to develop lists of typical situations in which French skills would be needed produced 36 dialogues based on that information. An analysis of the experiment concluded that, while the approach produces a high level of interest and motivation among students, it has several disadvantages. Some disadvantages are: it can be used in only a limited way because most students do not know what their linguistic needs are; the method addresses primarily productive rather than receptive skills; the vocabulary used is elementary and based on the learner's own limited experiences; the content tends to be self-centered; and there is the potential for producing lists of phrase-book utterances, the kind of material the method is trying to avoid, rather than creative linguistic competence. (MSE)

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ASPECTS OF THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN FRENCH

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ASPECTS OF THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN FRENCH

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The aim of this paper is to discuss how to integrate communicative competence in the teaching and learning of French as a foreign language in Swedish schools.

First I will briefly discuss the European Council proposal, the Threshold Level by van Ek (1975) and its French equivalent, Un Niveau Seuil by Coste et al. (1976), and then I will proceed to describe an experiment in teaching French on the basis of the learner's needs. Then I will describe the grammar, the vocabulary and some language functions of the material produced by the learners. Finally, restrictions of the method will be discussed and proposals for solutions made.

Background

At the beginning of the seventies, as is well known by now, the Council of Europe initiated a project to define a universal 'threshold level' for adults to communicate in a second language. The English version was published in 1975 by van Ek, and the French Un Niveau Seuil in 1976 by Coste and his team at St Cloud, Paris. The purpose of this model is to give the framework for a common-core course, consisting of elementary needs for language functions, notions, topics, vocabulary and grammar that are considered to be basic for further language skills both professional and more general.

The T-level consists of the following parts: a certain number of situations (shop, hotel, bus, etc.), which may be considered as sociolinguistic variables. These situations are specified with settings (indoors, geographical location, etc.) and topics (house-home, travel, personal identification, etc.) which the learners are supposed to need. Then a section called language functions is presented, ie. more abstract entities as "apologizing, warning, expressing facts, getting things done, etc." These functions may be considered as linguistic constants. This is followed by a section covering general and specific notions like expressing "quali-

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ties, negation, existence", or relational entities such as "time, location, etc." and then finally the linguistic exponents are listed, ie. the basic vocabulary of a T-level. The content specification is supplemented with indications of what linguistic activities and what degree of skill the pupils are supposed to achieve.

Un Niveau-Seuil (NS) consists of three main parts: (1) Actes de paroles, the equivalent of van Ek's language functions, but in the NS this part is more exhaustive; (2) Objets et notions, which is a parallel section to general and specific notions in the T-level; and finally (3) a Grammaire, based on abstract semantic categories which are derived from theoretical linguists such as Pottier, Guillaume and Tesnière.

The two proposals differ especially in defining the target groups: the T-level is meant for travelling adults and tourists whereas in the NS there are four additional categories: (1) migrants; (2) professionals and experts; (3) children and young teenagers in the obligatory school system; and (4) older teenagers and younger adults in a school or university situation.[1]

The Swedish National Board of Education asked me to examine the English proposal (this was before the publication of the French version) in order to see if it could be applied to the teaching of French in Sweden.

Of course there is a great deal to be discussed and even to be questioned in the T-level but I found that it could be interesting to test the basic ideas of the T-level in a concrete second language situation, ie. to take the learner's own needs as a starting point for teaching.

Before I discuss the experiment, let me just briefly mention some of my main considerations.[2] First, the idea of taking notional and semantic categories as a basis for language description is far from being new.[3] I would also like to underline the apparent contradiction in the proposal between the explicit target specification, on the one hand, and the phenomenon of the learner's transfer ability, on the other, that is referred to and presupposed throughout the model.[4] Finally, in spite of the author's claims of a certain scientific basis and of the integration of recent linguistic results, no systematic explanations of the model or references are given. Unfortunately this applies to the NS as well.

[1] "School versions" of both the T-level and the NS have been published. For the English version, see van Ek 1976 and for the French one, see Porcher et al. 1978.

[2] See Bartning 1976.

[3] See eg. Brunot 1922.

[4] For this discussion, see Ljung 1978.

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The Experiment

In the experiment I and my colleagues[5] asked the pupils to try to formulate their own language needs in order to influence the contents of their French teaching.

The experiment was made with pupils of French as a second and third foreign language at a secondary school in Stockholm. Using the T-level, the NS, their own experience and other subjective criteria, the teachers involved put together a document containing what we called "typical situations where one needs French". The proposals were made in Swedish and without any hierarchic ordering. This list was scrutinized by the pupils, modifications and additions were made and the result was a 23-point document. The first three points were:

1. greeting phrases
2. presenting oneself and one's family
3. going to the restaurant

Then a new set of material was presented to the learners; this time proposals of exponents (always in Swedish) were given under each headline of the 23-point document, e.g.

8. going shopping: the grocer's, supermarket, how to ask for quantity, sort, size, material, etc.

The pupils now scrutinized the whole material once more. Items were changed and added. The result was quite a rich document consisting of proposals from both teachers and learners.

The next problem was to develop a method of how to use this document. Here is a brief account for the method we finally used:[6]

Divided into groups of four or six, the pupils chose two situations they considered most important in the main document: A l'hotel and Au restaurant. These two situations were studied by all the learners. They were asked to find as many sentences as possible in Swedish or French that they considered necessary and natural for the two situations. Each group read their sentences aloud and tried to say them in French. All the sentences were written down, now in French, on overhead transparencies and slightly corrected by the teacher. A typical sentence at this stage was:

[5] Lisbet Mathieu and Eva Nöri at Högländsskolan, Bromma.

[6] The method was originally proposed and worked out by Marie Christine Malmport, LM Ericsson Telephone Company, Stockholm. For a more detailed account of the experiment, see Bartning, Mathieu, and Malmport 1978.

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Je voudrais une chambre pour une nuit, s'il vous plait.

Out of this self-produced pool of material the participants now made dialogues. The teacher helped with words, politeness formulas, idiomatic expressions, and general support.

They learnt their parts by practising role play and performed the dialogues in front of the whole class. The dialogues were corrected once more, and finally given back to the pupils, so that they could keep their own texts. This is an example of a typical dialogue:

- Bonjour. Monsieur, je voudrais une chambre.
- Est-ce que vous voulez une chambre pour une ou deux personnes?
- Je voudrais une chambre pour deux. Ça coûte combien pour une nuit?
- Ça coûte deux cent francs.
- Alors je la prends.
- Vous avez des bagages?
- Oui.
- Alors je peux demander au portier d'aller les chercher?
- Merci bien, Monsieur.
- Voilà la clé de votre chambre.
- Merci, elle est à quel étage?
- Au deuxième, à droite. Voulez-vous écrire votre nom ici dans le fichier, s'il vous plait.
- Volontiers.

Comments on the method

The immediate advantage of this way of working was the remarkable activity and interest that the learners showed. They were very satisfied with having produced useful language material themselves.

Furthermore they were highly stimulated and motivated when they discovered that they could produce quite a lot of information in French in situations they found important. This seemed to be the first time they were really conscious of the fact that they used their French in the classroom situation.

Before I discuss the difficulties and limitations of the proposed method and the T-level philosophy, I will briefly comment on the linguistic aspects of the material produced by the learners. The material has now been extended to 36 dialogues from six different situations and topics, namely A l'hotel, Au magasin, Au restaurant, A la gare, Les Vacances, Chez le docteur, Chez le dentiste.

A linguistic account of the dialogues

The grammatical contents. - In Bartning et al. (1978) we advocated a linguistic investigation of the dialogues. The idea was to examine the grammar of the dialogues to see which phenomena were represented in order

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to intensify the teaching and learning of exactly these parts. This means turning traditional grammar teaching upside down: instead of constructing texts around grammatical structures which are traditionally considered the most important ones, the materials production now starts from the language needs, the grammatical structures are picked out and described, the teaching is focussed on these items.

In the preliminary analysis of the syntax and morphology of the dialogues, the following items were found to be the most frequent:

(1) yes/no questions:

a. normal word order + intonation
b. est-ce que questions
c. inversion

(2) questions with interrogative words:

a. interrogative pronouns
b. " adverbs

(3) verb constructions

a. regular verbs
b. irregular verbs

(4) use of pronouns:
personal pronouns in the objective form in the context of

a. simple tense
b. past tense
c. infinitive

(5) tense

a. présent de l'indicatif
b. conditionnel
c. passé composé
d. futur périphrastique, futur simple
e. impératif
f. imparfait

(6) articles

a. article partitif
b. negation of pas de, adverb + de
c. definite article with verbs like aimer

(7) adverbs and adjectives

a. comparison

These seven areas of grammar do not of course cover all the linguistic exponents of the dialogues but they contain the main part.

The fact that the dialogues contain many questions could be predicted, because the material consists of dialogues which reflect situations where one asks for favours, services, seeks information, etc.

As far as the verbs are concerned, the first group is dominant, as can be expected, among the regular verbs. Among the irregular ones the high

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frequency of pouvoir and vouloir is noticed. This is also understandable considering the typical service character of the situations: something is to be performed. The wishes are expressed in polite formulas containing vouloir and pouvoir. In such cases the conditionnel is used in French, and this is confirmed by the high frequency of this tense. The other frequent irregular verbs include avoir, être, faire, prendre and aller.[7]

Besides the conditionnel, the most frequent tenses are the présent de l'indicatif, the passé composé and the futur périphrastique.

As a consequence of the high frequency of vouloir and pouvoir as auxiliaries and of the use of the futur périphrastique, the most frequent position of objective personal pronouns was before the infinitive.

As far the use of the article is concerned, we found many examples of the article partitif; its use must be mastered when shopping and eating in France, as everyone knows.

The fact that knowledge of the comparison of adjectives and adverbs is necessary for shopping and eating in French is further confirmed by this material.

Comments on the grammatical contents. - What conclusions can be drawn from this result? Perhaps this is a preliminary answer to the question of what a pedagogical-communicative grammar in French could contain, ie. we have got a first model for a grammar that starts from the use of the language instead of its structure.[8]

For many learners this will simply be a reactivation of old grammatical knowledge but from a new point of view. They understand more easily the importance of knowing, eg., the conditionnel. They become aware of why they need to learn and master certain grammatical structures and grammatical exercises become more meaningful and coherent.

It is important to underline here that the grammatical items which are considered the most "communicative" and necessary should not be taught or learnt as isolated phenomena but with reference to their paradigms. Some items demand more basic forms of the paradigm, others more advanced ones: eg. to understand the form and the use of the conditionnel the learner must probably first be introduced to the présent and futur and for the comparative

[7] Cf. the first five verbs in modern French novel vocabulary examined by Engwall (1974:153): être, avoir, dire, faire, voir; then pouvoir, savoir, vouloir, prendre.

[8] Cf. Leech and Svartvik 1977 for this kind of grammar for English.

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forms of adjectives and adverbs the positive and the superlative are needed. As Hyltenstam (1979) points out, we should probably go on with the same grammatical progression as before, ie. productive forms appear before non-productive, simple structures appear before more complex, etc.

It is not the case, as some people might think, that we can throw grammar away when working within the communicative framework. On the contrary, and this is where research is needed, investigations of what grammatical structures correspond to different functions and semantic categories seem very important.

This kind of language description leads the teaching of foreign languages to questions like "How do you express past time in French?" and not "How do you use the imparfait/ passé simple in French?" One starts from the needs of expression rather than the linguistic forms.

Another important question to answer in this context is how the learner can be made to internalize meaningful generalisations of a language, not only grammatical generalisations but also functional and notional ones, which enable him to create utterances that he has not heard before and so deal with situations that neither the course designer nor the learner can predict.[9]

The Vocabulary. - It is needless to say that the choice of the situations governs the choice of the vocabulary in our material.

When using this type of teaching, sooner or later the well-known didactic conflict will appear between choosing the most frequent words and choosing words necessary for communication, ie. more informative words. 'Until recently, course designers, school authorities and authors of manuals were guided by the idea that the most frequent words are those to be learnt in the first place. But if you take only frequency into account, let us say the first 1500 words, this could result in only a few, or even none, of the primary needs of expression being covered.[10]

This conflict appears particularly at a basic level, where you want to choose words and espressions as frequent, 'easy', and general as possible, which at the same time should be adequate to the situation, need, or function.

[9] For a similar discussion, see Page 1978:98.

[10] For an interesting discussion of these problems, see Magnusson 1979.

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Let us take an example: Is the French expression suffrage universel too difficult for a basic level? The problem cannot be put that way I think; if you speak of the political system of your country and if this topic is considered to belong to the learner's basic needs, then you must include this expression. If some needs can be seen to be more important than others, then these needs should be given priority even at a threshold level despite their degree of difficulty.[11] This leads to a discussion of what a basic vocabulary consists of or ought to consist of. This is, however, a subject far too vast to be taken up here.

Let me just mention that Un Niveau-Seuil has already become an important supplement and perhaps a competitor to the Français Fondamental in French didactics, as a unilingual word-phrase dictionary of spoken French, especially for the teacher and course designer.[12]

Speech acts and semantic categories. - The next step in the analysis should be a functional analysis. When we talk, we are doing different things at the same time; eg. we can inform people, ask them questions, persuade them, express greetings, promises, threats, thanks, orders, etc. These acts are speech acts or principal functions of utterances.

Language has developed certain types of utterances for principal functions of speech acts. In our material the following functions, among others, were represented.[13]

Principal Function:	Example:	Formal Characteristics:
1. Assertion (statement of objective facts)	J'ai une chambre pour vous au 1er étage	Finite verb in second position, preceded by subject
2. Questions (influencing the listener to give information)	Vous avez une salle de bain? Avez-vous...? Est-ce que vous avez...?	Word-order, intonation, particles
3. Imperative (influencing the actions of the listener)	Suivez-moi! Prenez celle-ci!	Verb in imperative at the beginning of phrase, pronoun after verb
4. Optative utterances (expressing wishes of the speaker)	Pourvu qu'il fasse beau demain	Conjunction +que + subjunctive of verb
5. Exclamations (expressing the speaker's emotions, attitudes, eg. joy, irritation, disappointment)	Quelle chance! Zut!	

[12] Cf. Hausmann 1979.

[13] The table was inspired by Linell (1978:184).

The problem here is not only to make an inventory of speech acts but also, once the categories have been described, how to teach them: should we integrate as many language functions as possible with a few linguistic exponents each or should we, instead, limit the number of the functions and give as many exponents as possible?

The answer could be a cyclic principle as suggested by Hyltenstam (1979:78): First you give a review of a great number of functions and notions, eg. ask, ask for, regret etc., with few exponents for each. In the next cycle you come back to the same function /notion and practise alternative exponents.

Such semantic categories supplement the teaching of grammar and vocabulary. In the shopping scene we just saw, you find the following categories of expression: greetings, asking for something, expressing choice or preference, expressing notions of size, colour, quantity, shape, accepting and declining, dealing with money, thanking and saying good-bye.

Perhaps we can agree with Page (1979:116), who writes about the same categories: "These are the categories of language which, over the next few years, will become as familiar to teachers as the categories of noun, perfect tense and aspect are now."

To get closer to this kind of grammar based on semantic categories, research is needed, especially concerning the French language, not only of what I have presented here, namely young learners' and their teachers' intuitive needs or other subjective needs and functions.

Concluding remarks

Let me summarize the advantages of the method and the problems and even dangers connected with this kind of teaching.

As was mentioned before, the immediate reaction among the learners was extremely positive. They felt motivated because they were given the chance to speak French in situations which they felt were meaningful. For the first time they seemed to be aware of the fact that they really used the foreign language.

However, it is quite clear that it is not sufficient to continue in this way, even on a larger scale, to find out what needs pupils have or will have: in general, young learners do not know and cannot know why they learn a foreign language at school. It is also evident that this method is concerned with productive skills rather than with receptive ones; it demands a fairly high degree of such skills as speech planning, access to

vocabulary, rate of speech, pronunciation, intonation, etc. It goes without saying that receptive skills like reading and listening must also be practised.

Another problem concerns the vocabulary of the dialogues. There might be the danger that this kind of vocabulary becomes colourless, rather 'poor', and elementary even at more advanced levels, since it is principally based on the learners' own limited experience and knowledge (and not that of an inspired author of a manual). However this is a consequence of our method.

A similar consequence of the method and of T-level philosophy is the fact that the topics, the contents to be learnt, are typically 'self-centred' topics, here the learners being teenagers. Not only the vocabulary, but also the learner's attitude to language learning, is self-centred. One of the recognized non-linguistic goals of language teaching is to introduce new cultures and ideas to develop understanding between people of different nations. Thus it will be important to supplement the functional aspects with cultural ones.

A more serious problem often mentioned in connection with the functional-notional approach is concerned with the danger that the learner will end up with a set of phrase-book utterances in the form of lists learnt by heart, and not with effective competence, ie. creative linguistic competence. In a way this is exactly what is avoided by our method: we do not use ready-made lists of phrases; the learners create new texts with the help of the teacher, grammars, dictionaries and, why not, older phrase-books for tourists.[14]

What is really also tested is the teacher's spontaneous communicative and linguistic competence in French. If, or when, a communicative approach is introduced more widely, teacher training must be altered in this respect.

It seems reasonable to let the knowledge that we have about functions and notions enrich the structurally based grammars and curricula which we use, rather than replace them. At the present moment it seems to be beyond discussion that knowledge of grammatical structure is more powerful and economical in generating great numbers of sentences than knowledge of semantic categories.

It is advisable to work on two levels, systematically: the linguistic contents with functional and notional aspects and the linguistic expression. In this way the learner builds up a grammatical system which will work for the new language.

[14] Cf. Page 1979.

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